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The Discursive Construction of Lower-Tracked Students: Ideologies of Meritocracy and the Politics of Education

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Abstract: This study considers the discursive construction of a particular type of student in Singapore—the lowest-tracked, Normal Technical (NT), secondary school student. Shaped by meritocratic policies, educational practices, and ideologies common to many late-modern societies, students in the NT track are institutionally and individually constructed through the results of high-stakes testing regimes and essentialist views of ability. This article extends an understanding of the NT student as a widely held, deficit construction in Singapore by considering its use as an ideological label in interpersonal and institutional discourse. I consider how school leaders' and government commentaries about NT students' abilities, opportunities, and supposed characteristics provide insights about the processes through which students are recruited into institutional categories of deficit and risk—i.e. differentiated instruction, ascribed ability, and these processes' translation into educational structures and practice in the name of meritocracy. While the illustration of this phenomenon is uniquely Singaporean, implications include concerns about equity, constructions of ability, and ideologies of merit common to late modern society.
Keywords: tracking; discourse; meritocracy; Singapore; ideology.

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La construcción discursiva de los estudiantes de rendimiento bajo: Ideologías meritocraticas y políticas de educación.
Resumen: Este estudio considera la construcción discursiva de un tipo particular de estudiantes en Singapur – estudiante de la escuela secundaria asignados a los grupos de bajo rendimiento en la escuela Normal Técnica (NT). Formado por políticas meritocráticas, prácticas educativas, e ideologías comunes a muchas sociedades modernas tardías, los estudiantes en NT son institucionalmente e individualmente configurados a través de resultados de regímenes de pruebas y perspectivas esencialistas sobre la capacidad de aprender. Este artículo amplía la comprensión del estudiante NT como una construcción de un déficit ampliamente celebrada en Singapur, considerando su uso como una etiqueta ideológica en el discurso interpersonal e institucional. Se analizas cómo directores de la escuela y comentarios gubernamentales sobre las supuestas capacidades, oportunidades y características de los estudiantes NT proporcionan una visión sobre los procesos mediante los cuales los estudiantes son reclutados en categorías institucionales de déficit y riesgo – instrucción diferenciada, la capacidad atribuida, y la traducción de estos procesos a estructuras y prácticas educativas en el nombre de la meritocracia. Mientras que el ejemplo de este fenómeno es único para el caso de Singapur, se discuten implicaciones en relación con construcciones sobre equidad, capacidad e ideologías de mérito comunes a las sociedades modernas tardias.
Palabras clave: grupos de bajo rendimiento; discurso; meritocracia; Singapur; ideología.

A construção discursiva de alunos com baixos resultados: ideologias meritocráticas e política da educação.
Resumo: Este estudo considera a construção discursiva de um tipo particular de estudantes em Singapura estudante do ensino médio atribuído a grupos de mau desempenho na escola Técnica Normal (NT). Formado por políticas meritocráticos, práticas educacionais e ideologias comuns muitas sociedades modernas final, os alunos NT são institucionalmente e individualmente configurado através de resultados de teste regimes e perspectivas essencialistas sobre a capacidade de aprender. Este artigo amplia a compreensão do aluno NT como uma construção de um amplamente realizada em déficit Singapura, dada a sua utilização como um rótulo ideológico no discurso interpessoal e institucional. Você pode analisar como diretores de escolas e comentários do governo sobre os recursos supostamente, oportunidades e características dos alunos NT fornecer informações sobre os processos pelos quais os alunos são recrutados em défice categorias institucional e riscos diferenciados instrução, a capacidade atribuída, e a tradução desses processos para as estruturas e práticas educativas em nome da meritocracia. Embora o exemplo deste fenômeno é exclusivo para o caso de Singapura, implicações sobre construções de imparcialidade, competência e mérito ideologias comuns sociedades modernas final são discutidas.
Palavras-chave: grupos de baixo desempenho; fala; meritocracia, Singapura; ideologia.

Introduction

Practices that provide systematic differentiation of education based on students' achievement or supposed abilities (known variably as tracking, streaming, and ability grouping) allocate students to different schools, curricula, or courses. In Singapore, tracking (known there as "streaming") begins in late Primary school and entails separate curricula (and sometimes schools) for the entirety of secondary school and also shapes the examinations students take that dictate tertiary educational pathways. This article examines the discursive construction of a particular type of person, the lowest-tracked students in Singapore's education system, as mediated by ideologies of

meritocracy across scales of discourse: talk (micro-interactional), policy and curricula (meso-institutional), and circulating socio-historical categories (macro-social) (Lemke, 2000; van Dijk, 2003; Wortham, 2004). I illustrate below how processes of NT students' discursive construction across scales lead to a type of person who seems to exist, as much in the cultural imaginary as in lived experience. Students in the lowest-track in Singapore's education system are often imbued with certain immutable or naturalized characteristics that draw both from widely available (macro-social) categories of ability as well as how ability is measured and defined in local educational institutions (meso-institutionally). By considering how NT students' ascribed characteristics shape what is seen as their rights, responsibilities, and abilities on the micro-interactional scale, I aim to illustrate how the discursive scales across which NT students are constructed as a type operate in mutually constitutive ways, with local commentaries reinforcing more broadly circulating policy and media characterizations.

Singapore is a particularly fascinating context for exploring how educators' and government's discourse link tracking and student types, because, unlike most Western nations where tracking is in decline, it remains a robust feature of the local educational structure in Singapore (Kam & Gopinathan, 1999; Talib & Fitzgerald, 2015). Singapore is also dramatically different from other high-achieving Asian countries (e.g., Korea, Japan, Hong Kong), with its higher income inequality and lower social mobility (Corak, 2013; I. Ng, 2014), larger gaps in achievement between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds (akin to those of the UK and US) (L. Lim, 2013a), sustained low academic achievement of students from the indigenous Malay ethnic group (Rahim, 1998; Talib & Fitzgerald, 2015), and disproportionately high representation of students from Chinese (ethnic majority) in elite schools (Barr, 2006, Singapore Department of Statistics, 2011). Lionel Lim (2013a) further cites evidence of class-based disparities in Singapore, including disproportionate numbers of high-socioeconomic status (SES) and English-speaking students attending elite schools and being awarded prestigious national scholarships (Kang, 2005; Kwek, 2007; Ministry of Education, 2012a, 2014a; Singapore Department of Statistics, 2011). As a small city-state with a tightly controlled, government-run education system and media, Singapore therefore provides a fascinating and productive discursive space in which to explore the role of meritocratic ideologies on tracking and students' constructed and real opportunities.

The germ that began this paper stems from interpretations that coalesced over my four years participating in and researching learning contexts in Singapore as a foreign faculty member at a Singapore university. More specifically, the micro-interactional data I consider below is comprised of interviews conducted as part of a three-year research project I led in Singapore. This project engaged youth who were academically marginalized (i.e., lower-tracked, lower-socioeconomic status, dropped-out) in multimodal storytelling workshops in both in- and out-of-school contexts (e.g., Anderson, Stewart, & Aziz, in press). I therefore came into contact with many forms of discourse about NT students: written, spoken, implicated, and embodied. In analyzing how lower-tracked students are constructed in Singapore, I illustrate linkages to the ways that tracking and meritocracy are taken up by individuals and the broader educational politic as seemingly neutral ways of shaping expectations, opportunities, and measurement as well as ascription of ability.

This study contributes to ongoing discussions in this journal and elsewhere about how ideologies shape discourse through which education policies, systems, and practices affect students' opportunities and futures in complex, multi-layered ways (e.g., Bertrand, Perez, & Rogers, 2015; Dorn & Ydesen, 2014; Oakes, Wells, Jones, & Datnow, 1997; Spillane, 2012). It also offers theoretical and practical implications beyond the Singaporean context, in part, due to the neo-liberal and meritocratic ideologies driving education and political systems worldwide (Apple, 2006; Hursh, 2007; Koh, 2011) in which market-based discourses frame education in terms of maximizing

resources toward greatest economic growth and competition. In the following sections, I outline the theoretical framework informing the analysis and provide background on Singapore's educational context before detailing methods and presenting findings.

Theoretical Framework

Interest in the ways that language use and other forms of meaning making contribute to the discursive construction of persons as types, or kinds, has proliferated in interactional (socio)linguistics and linguistic and cultural anthropology for decades (e.g., Anderson, 2008; Eckert, 2000; Leander, 2002; McDermott, 1996; Mehan, 1996; Silverstein, 2003). The analysis below centers on the role of ideologies, seen as socially shared forms of knowledge (van Dijk, 2012) that are resources for micro-scale discourse between individuals as well as educational institutions and global imaginaries at the meso- and macro-scales, respectively. Such ideologies shape the ways that individuals, groups, and types are brought into being through talk and interaction, policy, and widely circulating narratives across the multiple scales of discourse that animate them. Table 1 presents a graphic depiction of the scalar analytic framework I apply in the analysis below.

Table 1
Illustrating Discursive Scales

Scales	Micro-interactional	Meso-institutional	Macro-social
Discursive Manifestation	Talk	Policy, curricula	Circulating socio-historical categories
Discursive Force	What is said/done	Operationalizing constructs	Framing how things "are"
Locus	Individuals	Institutions	Global imaginaries
Timescale	Moment-to-moment	Days, months, years	Generations
Example	Characterization of individual traits	Tracking system	Low-ability (as a category)
Form of Evidence	Interviews	Policy briefs, government media	Widely-available categories

Wortham's (2004) framework for analyzing processes of social identification across discursive scales was informed in part by Lemke's (2000) timescales, both of which I employ here. Their frameworks examine how processes like learning or identification rely on discursive resources for their construction, which span the macro-social scale (socio-historical) across decades (e.g., the idea of lower-tracked students); the meso-scale across days, months or years (e.g., curricula); and the micro-scale from moment-to moment (e.g., discussions). A scalar framework supports my analytic illustration of how circulating socio-historical concepts of ability and supposed evidence thereof are locatable in meso-scale constructs (e.g., test scores and tracking systems) and are taken up in Singapore as resources at the micro-level as justifications for beliefs and characterizations of NT students as a type in discussions.[1]

[1] Talib and Fitzgerald (2015) also used a scalar approach in their critical discourse analysis of policy texts to

My analysis is also informed by van Dijk's (2012) ideological approach to discourse in which ideologies are seen as shared representations, rather than structural elements located solely at the systemic, institutional level. Accordingly, local interactions between individuals (micro-scale) provide evidence of labels and categorizations as shared representations recognizable within social groups (e.g., what a NT student is and does). These recognizable representations gain coherence from more broadly available macro-social constructions (e.g., low-ability). Shared representations and widely available categories are then reinscribed and gain legitimacy and fixedness at the meso-scale via policy and curricula, which provide a set of further entrenched representations for categorizing and justifying such categorizations of individuals at the micro-scale. These discursive processes support and are shaped by widely available and naturalized socio-historical assumptions about "how things are," including individuals' supposed abilities, the role of systems in identifying and serving individuals, and the mechanisms by which persons come to be seen as types.

Lastly, I take up McDermott and colleagues' cultural analysis (McDermott, 1996, 2004; McDermott, Goldman, & Varenne, 2006; McDermott & Varenne, 2006). According to this framework, units of analysis are seen as larger than individuals and are situated politically, economically, and historically as processes in which available positions for individuals are culturally created, often within a problematic, reductionist view of minds, abilities, and categorical ascriptions. I therefore frame discursive constructions here as complex and situated processes with collective and multi-scalar units of unfolding, rather than purely individual or free-floating constructions.

Within this framework, my primary analytic focus is on discourse, which I define as meaning making in its broadest sense, including talk, texts, practices, and belief systems. This view of discourse stems from a language-in-use approach within pragmatics and semiotics (e.g., Blommaert, 2005; Hymes, 1996) as well as Wortham's (2004) aforementioned discourse analysis of social identification across scales. I therefore consider discourse as a form of social practice and meaning making that is necessarily value-laden and socio-historically situated. I use ideology to refer to the often taken-for-granted belief systems about how things are, what/who counts or is valued, and justifications (implicit and explicit) for those beliefs. Following van Dijk (2006), I see ideologies as ideas or assumptions that are socially shared but are distinct from the actual systems or institutions on which they are based. Accordingly, I look to multiple forms of discourse for evidence of ideologies shaping available resources, categorizations, and constructions across scales.

A view of discourse across multiple scales (e.g., Anderson, 2009; Blommaert, 2007; Canagarajah & de Costa, in press; Lemke, 2000; van Dijk, 2003; Wortham, 2004) centrally informs the analytic approach to discourse I take here, whereby I situate what individuals say about NT students within a broader backdrop of what is seen to count for NT students and their education more broadly. I specifically locate micro-scale discourse in interviews with school leaders at the research project's partner school, meso-scale discourse in educational policy texts and government media coverage on the NT track, and macro-scale discourse in globally available notions of ability and meritocracy (see Table 1). I illustrate in the analysis below how discursive constructions of NT students operate across these scales via shared ideological representations (i.e., meritocracy and ability) that link discussions, policies, and widely circulating and taken-for-granted constructs that serve as resources for categorizing and justifying NT students' supposed rights, roles, and abilities.

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examine metaphors of diversity and structural inequality in Singapore's education system. Their framework aims to "reveal the structural aspects" of educational inequality in policy (p. 449), in part, by framing the meso-scale as an intermediary between what they frame as more concrete micro (individual)- and macro (neoliberal economic discourse) scales. The present study takes a less structuralist approach; while I also view discourse as ideologically motivated and multi-scalar, I posit the meso-scale as a concrete realization of discourses (however ideologically mediated) locatable in policy and curricula.

Singapore's Educational Context

Singapore is a post-colonial, democratic city-state in Southeast Asia. Its population of roughly 5.5 million is comprised of about 70% citizens and permanent residents (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2014), with the other 30% comprising foreign residents working there temporarily (whose children rarely attend schools that fall under the Singapore education system).[2] Three major ethnic categories describe Singapore's citizenry: Chinese (74.3%), Malay (13.3%), and Indian (9.1 %), with the other 3.3% falling into the category of "Other" (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2014). Unlike many of its neighbors, Singapore is multicultural, multilingual, and economically strong, and became so within a few decades of its independence from British rule (1824-1963) and its expulsion from the then-newly-formed federation of Malaysia in 1965. Singapore's stable economy, high per-capita income, safety. cleanliness, and a renowned educational system with high ranks on international academic measures (e.g., the Program for International Student Assessment [PISA] and the Trends in International Math and Science Study [TIMMS]) help to secure its attractiveness as a trading partner and location for multi-national corporations. Singapore's high performance on these international educational assessments not only promotes ideals of meritocracy but, in so doing, also perpetuates social disparity and lack of educational equity in ways that align with technocratic discourses of the global knowledge economy and fear of not keeping pace globally (Koh, 2011; L. Lim, 2013b; K. Tan, 2008), which I return to below.

While English is the language of commerce and instruction in Singapore and is one of four official languages (along with Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil), less than 35% of Singaporean citizens speak English at home (Stroud & Wee, 2012). Non-English home language among citizens also largely correlates with ethnicity (Malay and to a lesser extent Chinese) as well as lower socioeconomic status (Stroud & Wee, 2012). Students' home language further shapes their performance on the Primary School Leaving Exam (PSLE) taken in Primary 6 (6th grade) (Albright, 2006). The PSLE is a national, high-stakes, norm-referenced exam that allocates students to one of three main secondary school tracks ("streams") of which NT is the lowest (the others being Normal Academic (NA) and Express, in order of increasing prestige). In part, tracking is meant to accommodate differentiated learning. In the most crass sense, however, tracking is about the management of resources of which Singapore's most precious is its people (Koh, 2011).

Singapore's Secondary School Structure

Singapore's education system falls under the government's Ministry of Education (MOE), which controls both policy and curricula. Students are expected to complete a minimum of 10 years of compulsory education (Primary 1 through Secondary 4, ages six to 16), which is provided at no cost (aside from school fees, which are subsidized for lower-income families). MOE-run schools comprise three main types—neighborhood/mainstream, autonomous, and independent (in order of increasing prestige, based on examination scores as well as degrees of curricular and financial autonomy from the central government).[3]

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[2] Foreign workers tend to fall into a bimodal distribution of (a) elite workers who send their children to expensive international schools entirely outside of the Singapore government education system and (b) low-wage workers who travel to Singapore on their own (often sending money back home to support their family). The following descriptions pertain mainly to Singaporean citizens' and permanent residents' education, which comprise the vast majority of students at government schools. Singapore only admits international students on a selective, merit-based basis to government schools (MOE, 2015).

[3] The handful of independent secondary schools are the most elite secondary institutions in Singapore that still fall under some degree of MOE jurisdiction. They charge relatively high tuition and have a great deal of

Singapore adheres to Britain's older Cambridge system replete with capstone high-stakes examinations (written in Cambridge, U. K. specifically for Singapore) taken at the end of secondary school (N- or O-level) and junior college (A-level), the scores of which determine future educational opportunities. At the end of secondary school, most students take the O-Level examination, which is required for merit-based, selective, entry to post-secondary institutions (Junior College and Polytechnic). Junior colleges offer a two-year, pre-university program (equivalent to 11th and 12th grade) that leads to the A-level exams, which grant merit-based admission to university.[4] The five Polytechnics offer 3-year, industry-oriented diploma courses (after which top-performing students can gain entry to four-year universities). The Institute of Technical Education (ITE) offers pre-employment, technical and vocational courses, but generally does not provide direct avenues to university; the N-level exam taken by NA and NT students at the end of secondary 4 grants entry to ITE (with more technical programs like engineering requiring higher N-level exam scores).

Students are tracked throughout secondary school, beginning with their initial placement in one of three tracks based on the aforementioned PSLE. Some movement between tracks (in either direction) is possible based on exams, grades, and in some cases behavior, but movement upward is uncommon. Students take all classes within their tracked cohort (of 25-40 students); each cohort is ranked such that the lowest performing students are all grouped together for all coursework (a given school may have two to four NT cohorts per grade, for example). The three separate tracks dictate the curriculum students are offered as well as which Cambridge exams they sit for and, as a result, which post-secondary opportunities they have. Most neighborhood schools offer all three tracks, and teachers often teach across tracks (with each track being led administratively by a head of department within a school).

The Express track offers college preparatory courses, at the end of which students take the O-level exams, which grant direct entry to Junior College or Polytechnic. The highest-performing Express students are also eligible to enroll in an International Baccalaureate diploma (offered at seven of the most elite secondary schools), which grants direct access to four-year University following secondary school. About 60% of each Primary 6 cohort place into the Express track (MOE, 2014a). Students in the "Normal Academic" (NA) track take a range of courses similar to their Express counterparts but sit for the N-level exams after Secondary 4. In 2014, 75% of NA students passed with high enough scores on the N-level to qualify for an extra year of secondary school (Secondary 5) after which they can take the O-levels (MOE, 2014b). In addition, "through train pathways" offer direct entry to Polytechnics for top NA students (MOE, 2010). NT students comprise the lowest-achieving 15% of each incoming Secondary 1 cohort (based on PSLE scores, MOE, 2014a), and as this track is the current article's focus, I now describe its history in more detail.

History of Tracking and NT in Singapore

Ability-based streaming began in Singapore in 1979 in primary and secondary school (Gopinathan, 1996), and the NT stream was created in 1994 for the purpose of preparing the lowest-achieving students (15%) for vocational-technical, post-secondary courses at the ITE (MOE,

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freedom over curricula and other programs. Autonomous schools (*N*=28) are fully MOE-run but offer some enhanced programs (and charge marginally higher tuition than neighborhood schools). Neighborhood schools are general government-run schools that comprise the vast majority (*N*=120) in Singapore.

[4] According to the most recent statistical report (MOE, 2014), 25% of the current outgoing secondary cohort (based on total number of students who entered Primary 1 12 years' prior) enrolled in Singaporean universities last year. With the recent launch of two additional universities, the number has been projected to rise to 40% in the near future (Davie, 2012). For the relevant Primary cohort (entering Primary 1 10 years' prior), 44% went on to Polytechnic, 28% to Junior College, and 21% to ITE (MOE, 2014).

2014a) (e.g., computer applications) as well as core academic areas taught in a remedial fashion (e.g., English, Mathematics) and elective modules (e.g., hospitality, arts). NT students represent a heterogeneous mix, some of whom have special needs, some of whom simply do not perform well in key tested subject areas (e.g., mathematics, English).[5] Many come from non-English speaking homes, and some have supposed "attitude" or behavioral challenges. Students in the NT track are disproportionately Male, Malay, and from lower SES homes (Albright, 2006; Kassim, 2006; MOE 2012a; Rahim, 1998; Talib & Fitzgerald, 2015).

Each secondary school has a minimum required PSLE score for entrance, such that higher-ranked schools need not offer the NT track.[6] As mentioned above, NT students take the N-level exams, from which they cannot directly enter Polytechnic or Junior College, thus leaving few chances to attend university in the future. A 2004 Ministry of Education review of the NT curriculum aimed to decrease dropout rates and increase engagement and opportunities for top-performing NT students to move up to NA. This curricular review led to recommendations for more linkages to life applications, student-centered approaches, and collaborative, hands-on activities (MOE, 2004). Despite these reform efforts, however, moving out of the NT track is unusual. Between 2002 and 2012, an average of 380 students nation-wide (6%) of each outgoing Secondary 1 national cohort moved up from NT to the NA track. The number dropped significantly to an average of five students nationwide (far less than 1%) who moved up from NT to NA between Secondary 3 and Secondary 4 for the same time span (MOE, 2012b).

With the exception of the vocational ITE, there are very few tertiary academic options for NT students. Although students can go on to Polytechnic following ITE (and could go on to university from there if their performance is exceptional), an average of only 15% of each NT nationwide cohort (about 960 students) go on to polytechnics or other tertiary education after ITE (MOE, 2012b). These statistics describe the constrained future opportunities associated with being in the NT track. Tracking and the resultant construction of student types by these track names, is arguably to allocate appropriate resources in school, and rhetorically, to ensure that the all students live up to their fullest meritocratic potential (L. Lim, 2013b).

Singapore's Meritocratic Foundations

Singapore's government has been described as an "elite group of technocrats" (Koh, 2011, p. 272) as well as "a privileged class consisting of a small group of highly educated elites play[ing] a central role in governing, shaping policies, and determining societal priorities and values" (L-C. Ho, Avilar-Martin, & Leviste, 2014, p. 5). As Kenneth Tan (2008) pointed out, meritocracy has served as a longstanding ideological foundation for the Singaporean government (and thus the education system's) technocratic focus on talent, fierce competition, and bringing out the best in everyone. Meritocracy is inscribed as one of the five national Shared Values (Government of Singapore, 1991) "Community support and respect for the individual," which "encourages the community to support and have compassion for the disadvantaged individual who may have been left behind by the free market system" (T. Lim, nd). As such, Singapore's education system purports to advance the values of equality via opportunity and meritocracy, reserving benevolence for those who are "left behind". As L-C. Ho et al. (2014) pointed out, Singapore's Ministry of Education enforces the national Shared Values, and the meritocracy embedded therein, through curriculum and textbooks,

[5] Most children with special needs in Singapore attend segregated schools; only those with sensory "impairments" and mild autism attend mainstream secondary schools (MOE, n.d. a).

[6] Secondary schools were ranked yearly by MOE until 2012 according to entering cohorts' PSLE scores and outgoing cohorts' O-level examination scores. Rankings by school's cutoff PSLE scores (for entry into the Express track) are still available, however (see W. C. Tan, 2015 for the 2015 ranking).

which I argue completes a discursive cycle in which meritocratic ideologies serve as the ends and means for the privileged role of measurement and supposed ability as well as the tracking system they fuel.

Recent studies suggest that Singapore's tracking system and educational policies continue to have deleterious effects on equal opportunity. For instance, Lionel Lim (2013a, p. 4) described how explicit policies of supposed non-discrimination informed by Singapore's meritocratic ideology "obscure[s] the fact that students in Singapore stem from different socio-economic backgrounds and go to school differently prepared." Similarly, C-Y. Tan and Dimmock (2015, p. 3) discussed how centrally mandated educational policies in Singapore and their enactment by school leaders "operationalize prevailing notions of meritocracy" and exacerbate educational inequality. Irene Ng (2014, p. 367) also discussed the "segregating effects" of Singapore's tracking system and wide income disparity on opportunity and social mobility, claiming "there appears to be less equity in learning opportunities and outcomes in Singapore than the international average" (p. 371). Her findings demonstrated a high positive correlation between SES and reading performance on PISA when comparing Singapore to 12 other countries. Ng suggested that school-based tracking can lead to social segregation within and across schools that shape unequal opportunity.

Singapore's use of meritocracy to legitimize the maintenance of a ruling elite is also well documented (e.g., L. Lim, 2013a; K. Tan, 2008). Wong (2013, p. 189) described meritocracy in Singapore's political system as a mechanism for cultivating "promising students" for future government leadership. In this system, high-stakes examinations provide "an efficient means of assessing talent and effort" with top scoring students held to be "more disciplined, more driven to excel, and more deserving of reward" (Wong, 2013, p. 190, citing Chua, 2006). Koh (2011) highlighted how education and economy are linked in Singapore's discourses of anxiety and fear of economic unraveling if education falls short in preparing a globally competitive workforce. Similar to other nations seeking to contribute to the new global knowledge economy, a push towards addressing globalization as a problem space has been partially addressed in Singapore through various educational reform movements (e.g., Thinking Schools, Learning Nation, MOE, 1997), which Koh (2011, p. 273) characterized as "a technocratic reading of the global economy, and of globalization." Lionel Lim (2013a) also characterized recent educational reform as a further entrenchment of resources spent on elites, despite a strong and pervasive rhetoric of equal opportunity.[7]

Methods

Context of the Study

This study stems from a three-year, multi-sited, ethnographic research project I led while a faculty member at a Singapore university, which aimed to engage academically marginalized youth (e.g., lower-tracked, low-SES, from non-English speaking homes) across in- and out-of-school settings to foster opportunities to develop literacy practices that differed from the usual, restricted, ones common to the NT track (Albright, 2006; Ismail & A-L. Tan, 2005). As a foreign faculty member from the U.S., I worked closely with another foreign (Australian) faculty member and four

[7] These reforms include the Integrated Programme (whereby top achieving secondary students can bypass the O-level exams), the International Baccalaureate diploma (by which the most academically elite students can gain direct entry into university following Secondary school), and the Augmented Independent School Scheme (whereby top performing schools enjoy greater curricular autonomy including preferential admissions to feeder schools) (Lim, 2013a).

full-time research assistants (all Singaporean in the project's first year, with a foreign RA joining in the project's second year). In the first year of the project, we designed and facilitated out-of-school workshops for students in late-primary and early-secondary school at three community centers, two of which continued for the duration of the project (see Anderson et al., in press).

In the second and third years of the project we designed in-school workshops that served as curricular units lasting between three to five weeks each. For these we partnered with the same neighborhood (i.e., mainstream, non-elite) secondary school, Highland Secondary (all names are pseudonyms).[8] We worked with several cohorts of Secondary 2 and 3 (8th and 9th grades) NT students from 2009-2011 in their English language arts classes. We chose Highland due to a relationship with one teacher, Mr. H, who a research team member knew had a keen interest in alternative, arts-based approaches to teaching NT students. In addition, Highland's principal was supportive of opportunities for NT students to engage in project-based learning. Mr. H thus became our main partnering teacher for this project, and we designed a series of workshops in consultation with him over the project's second two years (see Anderson, 2015).

Data Sources

The four interviews I use as a form of micro-scale evidence took place with five school leaders and teachers of NT students at Highland. These include (a) a group interview with the principal, NT track Head of Department, and school counselor (66 minutes, 12,000 words), (b) an interview with the English Head of Department (46 minutes, 6,000 words), and (c) two interviews with Mr. H (totaling 60 minutes and 10,500 words).[9] A faculty member on the project led each, which were audiotaped and transcribed by members of the research team, verbatim with attention to pauses, laughter, and other pertinent non-verbal information. One goal of the interviews was to understand how school leaders at Highland talked about NT students. As the leadership at Highland was eager to continue developing engaging and meaningful NT learning opportunities, these interviews offered key insights for understanding some of the ways that NT students' construction operates at the micro-scale.

We indicated to the participants of the group interview and to the English Head of Department that the purpose of the interview was to "get a bit of context for the school and an understanding of NT kids in Singapore and… [to] learn about other programs and how schools are working to help NT kids" academically and personally while in school (quoted from the group interview). The interviews with Mr. H were mainly to check in about the units we had been conducting with him, as we met weekly on a less formal basis for discussion and therefore needed less context-setting in his interview. This corpus of interviews engages all key leaders relevant to the organization of opportunities to learn for NT students at this school. As a form of evidence, the interviews offer a view into particularized aspects of NT students' discursive construction at the micro-scale. I complement them with meso-scale evidence from Ministry of Education policy

[8] According to W. Tan's (2015) aforementioned rankings, Highland is in the lower third of Singapore secondary schools.

[9] The NT Head of Department, English Head of Department, and principal are Chinese-Singaporean males; the counselor is a Chinese-Singaporean female; and Mr. H is a Malay-Singaporean male. Excerpts are verbatim, with ellipses representing omitted content, bracketed words added to aid readability, and words in parentheses to provide needed contextual information. Interviewees at times spoke a variety of local English, called Singlish, which I modified slightly for broad readability of transcripts. I also edited for disfluencies (e.g., "um," thinking aloud), as this analysis is not about *how* interviewees spoke but rather what they said. Interviews took place in June 2009 with the exception of Mr. H's second interview, which was conducted in August of the same year.

briefings and media coverage about the NT track and curriculum, from its inception in 1994 to the present.

Analytic Methods

My initial analytic interest was primarily in the interviews, as they present such a rich source of data about one site of NT students' discursive construction. However, I came to realize that, according to my theoretical and epistemological assumptions, NT students' situated construction was a multi-scalar phenomenon and should be analyzed as such. I therefore examine below how categorizations of NT students at the meso-scale of policy briefings and government media coverage are taken up as resources at the micro-scale (interviews) as justifications for the social identification of NT students as a type with a set of presupposed attributes. In the intermediate analytic process through which I made sense of the interviews, I first wrote narrative descriptions of each interviewee's comments about NT students, the NT track, and related educational process, structures, and practices. I next noted how interviewees evoked policy rhetoric and widely circulating notions about ability and meritocracy. I thus aimed to make consolidated sense of the interviews by first labeling data segments according to how interviewees talked about NT students and curricula, then abstracting from the flow of the interviews into categories that cut across and through the interviewees' commentary to provide interpretive explanation of the micro-scale site of discursive constructions.

Similar to Wortham's (2004) analysis of social identification, I analyzed the processes of discursive construction of NT students by identifying characteristics or supposed behaviors that were persistently and consistently oriented to as a sign of a someone being recognizably of the type NT and the resources drawn from multiple scales of discourse as evidence and justification thereof. To best illustrate what was an interpretive process yielding many intermediate analytic representations, I present here a composite analysis of the discursive processes across micro and meso scales in the construction of NT students as a type in Singapore. For evidence at the micro-scale, I discuss illustrative excerpts from the interviews interspersed with interpretive discussion of how interviewees' commentary draws on their experiences. I also analyze how meritocratic ideologies cut across scales in (a) government briefs about policies and practices related to the formal schooling and tracking structures of NT students (meso); and (b) presuppositions and justifications about NT students and their track rooted in a meritocratic ideology of ability and naturalization of tracking (macro). While a great deal of interpretive and discursive analysis went into constructing the findings I present below, space limitations require that the conceptual argument I put forward here take precedence. I therefore draw on evidence from the detailed analysis of interviews and policy briefs/media coverage that led me to these interpretive findings in an illustrative, rather than exhaustive, fashion.

Analysis: The Discursive Construction of NT Students

I organize the following analysis according to two elements of NT students' construction that represent an underlying meritocratic tension across discursive scales: (1) an emphasis on sorting characterizing NT students' traits and abilities, presupposing what lies within and around those heard to be destined for the NT track based on their supposed behavior and abilities; and (2) an emphasis on serving characterizing features of the track and curriculum, heard as a mechanism of the system that arranges appropriate and differentiated opportunities and ensuing educational paths. In discussing these two emphases within the construction of NT students, I highlight

evidence across scales to illustrate the aspects of a meritocratic ideology as a shared resource for their construction.

Sorting

In the emphasis on sorting within NT students' discursive construction, stereotypical and presumed features of those who supposedly belong in the NT track, as well as the contextual stumbling blocks that further limit their meritocratic potential to achieve, serve to justify the naturalness of their grouping into the type NT based on the sorting mechanism in place (tracking) and the measures it relies upon (tests and, to a lesser degree, observed behaviors). Some of these named traits mentioned in the interviews included: not focused; can't do serious work; communication a problem; difficult to handle, disturb others; more vocal; good at hands-on work; street smart; not 'A' students in English; can't expect them to score 290 (high) on PSLE; simpler in their thought processes; can't read well or follow what's happening in class; parents generally not involved or supportive. The following excerpts illustrate some interviewee commentary to these ends.

> **Principal**. *During discussion of how NT students see their post-secondary paths.*
> Singapore has a very good sorting system…whereby you have kids who are very future, forward looking, able to delay gratification, and wanting to put in effort and all that. They tend to do better and they get sorted out, and after a while they all belong to the same group. And then, there could be kids that perhaps maybe are not able to bring themselves to delay gratification, wanting the immediate, or they may have some learning disabilities and all that, or certain learning habits may not be quite suitable and therefore, again, they get sorted out and you see them all in one group, in NT, and so on.

> **NT Head of Department**. *During long turn at talk discussing his view of NT students' learning profile.*
> [They] cannot be sitting in the class all the time paying attention for anything more than 30 minutes. [If] you demand 30 minutes of their attention and doing serious work with you, you are asking for trouble. You'll see people disturbing, walking around and all this. It's very standard behavior from them.

> **Mr. H**. *Discussing his general approach to teaching NT students.*
> Whenever I have a lesson with the students I tend to go down to their level when I teach, and I always economize my words, trying to make sure they understand the gist of my idea. So usually I don't speak in sentences, I give instructions…[because of] their language ability, their level of thinking.

> **English Head of Department**. *Describing how Highland aims for balance between focus on exams and openness to project-based learning.*
> So, it's not [for] exams but for the skills that we want them to achieve…I think you've given them a life skill that they can take away with them. Not only in terms of computer literacy skills [but] for NT students being able to put something together in totality. This is something that I feel that we always grapple with. Look at their writing. Their thought processes seem to come in parts, bits and pieces always. And we always have problems helping NT students to formulate some kind of a coherent kind of idea.

These excerpts illustrate a prevalent focus across interviewees' commentary on how students are sorted based on traits, thus justifying characterizations of NT students as a type with common attributes. The emphasis on sorting collects a complex of attributed traits and supposed abilities that not only define who is tracked into NT but also how that tracking is naturalized via the system itself. NT students are thus, in part, defined by the sorting system that places them in NT, which is central to the organization of schooling in Singapore. The logic underlying the focus on traits and abilities that lead to students being sorted into NT rests on a deterministic, essentializing ideology and faith in the mechanisms of sorting (i.e., tests, measurement, and performance), as I now demonstrate through evidence at the meso-scale.

The role of Ministry of Education-based narratives about NT students, especially in light of the centrally organized control the Ministry has on curricula and assessment in Singapore, shape the ways educators and others talk about the track and the students sorted into it, in large measure by providing authoritative characterizations of NT students. For example, a video introducing educators to the profile of students who would be served by the NT track when it first was created in 1994 characterized them as "good working with their hands," "short attention span," "creative," "work best in groups," and "willing to learn" (M. Ng, 1993). This early video encapsulates characterizations of NT students oft-cited in media and scholarly literature (e.g., Chang, Goh, Moo, & Chen, 1997; P. Ho, 2012), and fuels a meritocratic ideology supporting early tracking and ability-based educational reform regarding resource allocation and who is best served by academic, rather than vocational, education. Ideologies of meritocracy shape the ubiquitous ethos of high-stakes testing and the tracking system it fuels. Of particular note is the characterization "willing to learn," which might have been included so as to push back on a commonly held belief at the time that students who belong in NT had been thought of as unable to learn. The following comments from Albright (2006) about a 1979 commission report on tracking shed further light on this interpretation:

> Current educational pathways available in the Singapore education system, which are characterized by streaming and high-stakes national examinations, may largely be traced back to the "New Education System" recommended by the Goh Committee in 1979. In its report, the committee defended streaming as a "logical consequence of the fact that different children have different capacities to acquire knowledge." It further stated that "the system has been structured such that only the brightest 12 to 15% of schoolchildren can cope" and so "to subject the less able students to the same regime of learning has been the chief defect of our educational system in the past" (p. 2).

Another meso-scale example of a focus on sorting (vis a vis) differentiated learning in the name of meritocracy is illustrated in a newspaper article detailing the 2013 introduction of new secondary schools devoted entirely to the NT track. The national, government-owned, English language newspaper, *The Straits Times*, reported on the soon-to-open Crest Secondary School in an article titled, "Fun School for Normal Technical Students" (J. Ng, 2012). This article claimed that the school's curriculum will show NT students, "who include the least academically inclined", that "learning can be fun and useful" with a third of their time spent in "hands-on vocational modules" (J. Ng, 2012). This and the prior examples illuminate how micro- and meso-scale discourse can justify institutionally structured opportunities for students who would supposedly benefit from vocational education based on their lack of academic inclination or ability.

The locus of accountability for NT students' belonging in the NT track, based on the sorting element of justification for their construction, aligns with a meritocratic ideology of resource

allocation. NT students could, but rarely do, "achieve," because of their traits, behaviors, and situation (including comportment and test scores). Even in interview segments where school leaders spoke from their experiences with NT students as individuals who have talents, passions, and abilities, as Mr. H and the English Head of Department often did, the rhetoric of NT students' limitations quickly crept in, as illustrated in the following excerpt from an interview with Mr. H.

> **Mr. H**. *Discussing a past and ongoing multimodal storytelling workshop/unit we did with his Secondary 3 (14-15 year olds) NT English class.*
> [T]hey are playful, but they get the work done. They move about, they are not so focused, but in the end they know what they're supposed to do…For the Normal type, [if] you give them one side of the story, they can follow…This (second workshop) [is] too abstract…Even after I told them [the reasons for an argument] they can't link…they cannot even introduce the topic…They are simpler students-simpler in their thought processes.

Mr. H worked closely with NT students as their form and subject area teacher for multiple courses. He clearly loved his students and went to great ends to provide in- and out-of-class opportunities for them to find and develop their passions (e.g., leading an after-school club and learning journey trips abroad). He often spoke of his students in many conversations over our two-year partnership as able and wanting to achieve, as having talents, as being focused given the right context, and as capable of expressing themselves and pursuing their interests and passions. However, he too also returned to their traits and limited academic abilities they are of the "normal type," who have lower "language ability," and "level of thinking," are "simpler in their thought processes," that requires a teaching style that "goes down to their level."

Throughout these micro- and meso-scale examples, NT students are alluded to as a profile, or type, that includes a proclivity for hands-on, practical learning. However, the tenor of their characterization has shifted rhetorically over time, as has the nature of the track itself, towards more service-oriented (i.e., providing an appropriate service for them based on the results of the sorting mechanism), which brings me to the next type of emphasis within their construction—serving.

Serving

In contrast to sorting, which focuses on traits that supposedly lie within and around students (heard as justifications for their being sorted into NT), serving is a system mechanism framed as best supporting students during school and beyond based on their aptitudes and particular needs. According to this construction, NT is heard as a way to redefine success through differentiated curricula and instruction. Interviewees often appealed to the school's vision of supporting NT students' confidence and potential through encouragement and equal opportunity. In this micro-interactional commentary, the school functions as a place for NT students to develop confidence, gain life skills and even passions, all the while recognizing that high-stakes exams are a necessary formality that do not open up many possibilities, as the following interview excerpts illustrate.

> **NT Head of Department**. *Discussing what students need to be prepared for the 21st Century.*
> They may not be absolutely 'A' students in terms of the actual English, but the exposure will get them wanting to go into it. They won't worry about failing. I mean, the whole point [is] they will be failing anyway and [if] you still don't give them any chance to…go beyond the stage of, 'My language isn't good.'…At that point, it's not about exams, 'I must score well,' but they enjoy through the learning and failing at

> the same time…So streaming [tracking] is just a way the system is doing [it], but as long as they have passion, you know, and they are willing to do it, they have the confidence to do it, all other skills can come in later.
>
> **Principal**. *Discussing whether students transfer what they learn during project-based curriculum during Secondary 1-3 to exams in Secondary 4.*
> You know on one hand, we say that we want them to learn differently, different ways to engage them and so on. Then on the other hand we say, 'Oh, we still have to sit for exams, right?'...So we came up with our experiential learning, getting them more authentic kinds of learning…We hope that they will pick up those skills [literacy, numeracy] without realizing it- that actually all these [activities] are meant for the exams.
>
> **Principal**. *Discussing heterogeneity of NT students.*
> [Instead of asking] 'How smart are you?'…we seek to discover, 'How are you smart?' and then help them in that area to do well…We can't expect the NT kids to achieve like a 250 or 290 PSLE score. You've got to play the game differently…You've got to define what is success for these kids and help them to see [it].
>
> **English Head of Department**. *Describing how NT and Express track English curricula differ.*
> The Express [track] has got very different learning outcomes from NT. NT, the focal point for us would be really life skills- skills that they can bring with them out…so that they don't only learn, apply, and out you go, you know. It's also some element of analysis, critical thinking, and they leave with that skill…But it's a different set of outcomes, compared to an express student…But we're trying as well. We don't want to say 'Oh they can't do it.' But it takes a lot more effort actually for them, to tease it out of them.

This emphasis on the NT curriculum as a mechanism for serving students portrays a sort of track-blindness that arose in the group interview quite frequently (e.g., "if NT students are not treated differently, who is to say they are, in effect, different?"—NT Head of Department) and relies on assumptions that NT students' differences are externally locatable. Such features of a meritocratic ideology imply that any individual, NT or not, can do and be anything they put their mind to. Accordingly, the sorting system is heard as a formality, with the school there to provide support and opportunities for NT students to "achieve" in their own way. The focus thus is on difference and differentiation, or supposedly separate but equal opportunity. Suggesting that, aside from their institutional label, NT students are like other students implies that the structures that make NT a reality are a mere formalism, and that it is what students do or can achieve through hard work, perseverance, and with caring and support that really matters.

The serving aspect of NT students' discursive construction clearly aligns with the meritocratic rhetoric evident in much official recent coverage of the NT track at the meso-scale. For example, a Ministry of Education website described recent reforms to the NT stream: "The NT course [curriculum] serves the needs of students who are more technically inclined. It provides them with an opportunity to complete 10 years of basic education and prepares them for post-secondary education in ITE [Institute for Technical Education] (MOE, n.d. b). The Ministry webpage further elaborates that the reform aims to help NT students "find their interests and develop their talents, and for those who are able to do so, the flexibility to advance their learning in that particular subject" (MOE, n.d. b).

As these examples illustrate, the official rhetoric about NT students portrays them as hands-on learners best served by "soft" curricula that keep them in school until they are ready to enter the workforce. However, those who can, will have opportunities to pursue post-secondary education beyond ITE (the low chances of which were discussed above). While the explicit descriptions in both micro-scale interviews and meso-scale government briefs focus on talents and skills, the force of these and many other messages is that the vast majority of NT students would not be served by an academic focus due to their "different" abilities and profile.

Emphases on serving students by providing appropriate and differentiated opportunities to grow as individuals highlight lifelong learning and useful skill development as a form of equal opportunity that obscures the low material chances of equal outcomes. The promise of advancement and tales of NT students who move out of the NT track to realize the heights of academic advancement are far more prevalent than the statistics suggest of actual trends (e.g., Hoh, 2014; MOE, 2012b). The following vignette is illustrative of this trope.

> **English Head of Department**. *Discussing links between NT curriculum and ITE.*
> [E]very year we would definitely bring the NT students to ITE; however, we don't limit to ITE only. We give them chances to go to polytechnics to see. That's why I mentioned this boy from last year, [who shifted] three streams- NT to NA to Express. So we mentioned that when he was in Secondary 2 NT, he got a chance to go to the polytechnic for a career fair. He was like, 'Ok, this is going to be my route.'…We should not limit NT students to you know, 'You, just go to ITE.' I don't think it's fair. They should be given chances to go to poly[technic], the career fair, and then let them actually see, 'Cool, ok. It's quite interesting.'

The discursive construction of NT students highlights a juxtaposition that places NT students at the center of a seeming contradiction. On the one hand sits the inevitability of exams, their gatekeeping and sorting role in the system, NT students' supposed lacking of literacy and numeracy skills (mentioned in interviews) that largely shape scores on high-stakes tests and course grades by which students are measured and sorted, and other obstacles and traits that mark an impending lack of traditionally defined academic success (e.g., interviewees' mentions of lack of family support and resources). On the other hand lies the utmost importance of NT students' passion for learning and confidence in themselves as well as equal opportunities, which will serve them well beyond formal schooling. Despite aspects of the rhetoric around NT being a formality of the system from which students are given ample opportunities to transcend, however, they are still constructed as having noticeable (and here named) traits that differentiate them as a type of students—NT.

Dissonances and Contradictions

Despite the strong coalescence of sorting and serving across micro- and meso-scale evidence, dissonances complicate the constructions of NT as a natural type produced seamlessly by a meritocratic ideological construction. For example, a critique of the track-blind attitude surfaced in the school counselor's contributions to the group interview.

> **School Counselor**. *Responding to NT Head of Department's and Principal's track-blind claims of not distinguishing NT students from others outside of class.*
> Maybe I'll give a bit from the kids' point of view. I work more with the kids. I think as a school we don't see them any differently, and I think the kids know it…[However] when I see them on their own, they [share] a lot more about their

> own struggles, and I think there are moments when the kids do feel that, 'Yes, I'm different.'…Some of them struggle with not being able to read very well and not following what's happening in class…There's a lot of feel-good in the programs that we try and deliver…but do they actually think about where are they going, what's going to happen? I think for them it's very much day-to-day. They come to school, it's feel-good. 'My friends are here, the teachers are very encouraging.' But I don't think many of them think about their exams…I don't think we have brought them to a point where they actually think about, 'Where am I going, what's going to happen?'. Some of them have very unrealistic goals. They still talk about, 'I want to be a lawyer,'…without realizing that they are not going down that road. And because we try and make it so everybody is included, then they don't realize what's realistic. So they come to school in Sec(ondary) 1, Sec(ondary) 2 thinking that, 'I'm going to be just like anybody else.'… But for the NT kids…they know, I think head-wise, that 'I am going to ITE.' But, overall they just go day-by-day-by-day-by-day.

This vignette problematizes the naturalness of the serving mechanism and highlights fissures in the rhetoric of a track-blind attitude. Returning to the view of ideologies as shared representations, this contradiction reinforces the sorting emphasis while pushing back against the emphasis on serving via equal opportunities (e.g., "playing the game differently," and focusing on strengths and passions). The school counselor's comments call into question whether this more recent emphasis on the equality of opportunity side of meritocratic ideology, put forward by the Ministry of Education and echoed by this school's leadership, is in fact in students' best interests. If the rigidity of the system and tightly controlled opportunities for certain students' advancement remain as constrained as it currently is, no degree of positive rhetoric will increase opportunities for NT students' entry in tertiary education.

To summarize this analysis of the discursive construction of NT students, I offer the following points. First, shared representations of seemingly neutral, meritocratic mechanisms and values acquired students (McDermott. 1996) in terms of their track and how they are characterized accordingly. Second, these acquisitions constitute an ideological site for identifying and justifying the rights and responsibilities that go along with the structural and social positions and labels that accompany students when constructed as tracked types (NT). Third, some of these rights and responsibilities, like the track NT itself, await students with a full range of ascribed traits and contextual obstacles that they are presumed always, already to have. Taken together, these points underscore that NT students' belonging to a type comes at them from all sides, with part of the construction legitimized according to a seemingly valid and reliable measure (high stakes tests) as well as the view of their behaviors as further justification of the goodness of fit of that identification as NT.

Discussion

As I have illustrated, NT students are constructed according to (a) their supposedly internal qualities that lead to sorting and (b) the role of the system to serve them through appropriate (differentiated) curricula and opportunities. The above analysis rests on the assumption that discourse is a form of social practice supported by socially shared beliefs about, and justifications for, what counts. In this case, the form of what counts that is at stake is ability and how to arrange education around that concept. As illustrated above, meanings are made of NT students as a type through socially shared ideologies. I drew from evidence at multiple discursive scales to illuminate

how what people say to each other (micro-scale) gains meaning against the broader backdrop of what counts more broadly. Meso-scale discourse (what institutions stand for through policy and curricula) provides the operational categories as well as their attributes, while micro-scale discourse provides justifications for these categories (NT) and their necessity by populating them with stories that lend them a lived naturalness. Throughout these constructions across scales, the locus of accountability is implicated to lie with NT students. The system and its proponents are accordingly positioned as either naturalized or benevolent forces that respectively sort and serve students and the nation according to its best interests (often justified via market-based, meritocratic ideology). Put simply, in Singapore and beyond, policies and surrounding practices of tracking define the categories, while individuals presuppose and often reify the qualities heard to be indicative of an individual belonging to those categories.

Students become identifiable as a type when categories from macro-scale socio-historic tropes (e.g., low-ability) are operationalized at the meso-scale of policy to frame how students fit into the system based on the measures that land them there (e.g., test scores as proxy for students' capabilities). Presupposed categories like ability thus "can become robust categories of identity" by which students are framed as belonging to a type at the micro-scale (Wortham, 2004, p. 722). The systemic Singaporean concept of NT is thus a resource for identifying and justifying students' identification according to a global, socio-historical type (low-ability), along with the ideological legitimacy granted such a macro-scale construct, in part, due to widely-held social beliefs in its aptness or naturalness as a category by which to make sense of students and arrange educational systems.

Studies that examine international and comparative effects of tracking and high-stakes testing on educational equity and opportunity abound (e.g., LeTendre, Hofer, & Shimizu, 2003; Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2006; Oakes et al., 1997). Chmielewski, Dumont, and Trautwein (2013, p. 926) provided a succinct review of international research on tracking that outlined trends supporting the argument that tracking is detrimental to educational equality. Such studies have suggested that lower-tracked students' outcomes and opportunities are often diminished and often coincide with systemic race or social class bias (e.g., Gamoran & Mare, 1989; Lucas, 1999; Lucas & Berends, 2002; Oakes, 1985). In their international comparative study of PISA 2003 measures of students' mathematical self-concept, Chmielewski et al. (2013) concluded that higher degrees of everyday salience associated with certain types of tracking negatively affected lower-tracked students' self-concept. They further highlighted previous studies' findings that more explicit forms of tracking lead to wider disparities in achievement between tracks, and more rigid tracking systems lead to wider aspirational gaps between tracks as well (e.g., Buchmann & Dalton, 2002; Duru-Bellat & Suchaut, 2005). Similarly, Pfeffer (2015) found that student differentiation (tracking) had the strongest negative effect on measures of equality of opportunity regardless of other institutional characteristics in his study of post-schooling competencies (literacy rates) and credentials (degree attainment) as indicators of educational systems' quality and equality. Given the salience of Singapore's tracking, I tentatively extrapolate that the inescapability of deficit discourses across scales that surround NT students might very well have the same sort of negative consequences that are demonstrated in a range of international studies of the effects of tracking. However, the present study's aim is not generalizability of findings but rather conceptual and methodological generalizability regarding how ideologies permeate lived realities at multiple scales of discourse and therefore social life in ways that prove consequential for opportunities to learn.

Harkening to the institutional mechanism of tracking whereby meso-level structures (e.g., curricula, NT track) index cultural perceptions and expectations that transcend schooling mechanisms themselves, a prominent narrative around meritocracy is its efficiency in "revealing",

the best candidates from the pool competing for educational or professional standing (K. Tan, 2008). In a mixed-methods study of student, teacher, principal, and parent attitudes around educational success and failure in Belgium (a country with similar tracking and equity patterns as Singapore), Clycq, Wouwen, and Vandenbrouck (2014) identified prominent aspects of a meritocratic ideology and deficit discourses in interviews and surveys. Notably, participants often ascribed success according to individual effort, competence, or merit, and they ascribed failure to deficit discourses such as lack of family support and cultural differences (home language and culture). Interviews with students and teachers also included supposed lack of support and resources at home as oft-cited causes for low academic achievement among lower-SES and ethnic minority students (Clycq et al., 2014). Due to the disproportionate number of lower-SES, ethnic minority, and students from non-English-speaking homes in the NT track discussed above, such findings perhaps shed light on the Singapore context as well.

Similar to epistemologies shaping educational research that claim an objective view on ability, performance, or opportunity—i.e. "scientistic" leanings that treat social context as noise and randomized, controlled trials as a gold standard (cf. Alvermann & Mallozzi, 2009; Biesta, 2007; Fischman & Tefera, 2014; Moss et al., 2009)—meritocracy is an epistemology of personhood through which individuals gain value (or fail to). Also, much like the tension between sorting and serving that I highlight in the analysis above, meritocratic narratives in Singapore vacillate between meritocracy-as-equal playing field (i.e., equity of opportunity) with its focus on blindness to difference on the one hand, and meritocracy-as-mechanism for allocating services and resources with its focus on efficiency and competition on the other (L. Lim, 2013b; K. Tan, 2008). What remains most resonant in the above analysis is an underlying tug of war between these two views of meritocracy: (a) mechanism for resource allocation (sorting) and (b) track blindness (serving), with the Singapore government's rhetorical line currently aligning more with the equal opportunity strain of meritocracy. Regardless of the face validity of the prevailing meritocratic ideology shaping what is said of opportunity and success in Singapore education, Kenneth Tan's (2008) following comments are apt:

> [T]hose who are picked by meritocracy as having merit may already have enjoyed unfair advantages from the very beginning, ignored according to the principle of nondiscrimination. If these relevant social differences are hidden beneath an uncritical, even celebratory, rhetoric of meritocracy (as blindness to differences), then the problem of securing equality of opportunity and a reasonably level playing field will be severely underestimated. (p. 8)

What Tan calls an ideology of inequality emerges from meritocratic ideals, in Singapore, the U.S. and beyond, but not without its dissidents (cf., Yek & Penney, 2006). Like many ideologies underpinning widely available ways to imagine individuals' possibilities and abilities, the insidiousness and seemingly neutral "facts" of the ways of knowing they perpetuate obscure as much as they might supposedly illuminate.

Conclusions and Implications

Arguably, education systems across the world increasingly rely on the same sets of values and ideologies that constrain possibilities for what success looks like (Altbach, 2015; Blommaert 2010; Collins 2009; Collins & Blot 2003). Implications of this reduction in the ways of knowing and being that are institutionally valued bode ill for students who do not conform to a narrow ideal of

ability as measured by standardized tests. While large-scale movements over the last few decades have begun questioning essentialized assumptions about ability based on race, class, gender, and geography, our tracking systems and the tests, policies, and institutions that uphold them are questioned far less often in policy, despite substantive debate among scholars (e.g., Dorn, 2014; Gorski, 2014; Klapproth, 2015; Koyama 2013; Nichols et al., 2015; Oakes, 2015; Rustique-Forrester, 2005).

At its heart, the article is about insidious discursive cycles: how the ways we talk about others and the belief systems they animate reinforce certain taken-for-granted assumptions that then become shared resources for further miring ourselves in narrow views of, and mechanisms for arranging, opportunity. Moreover, systems and policies provide further justification and authority by which seemingly natural and neutral differentiation becomes entrenched. The specter of "what counts" in education continues to draw on aggregated data to justify labeling students as types, schools as types, and more recently in the U.S., teachers as types, with Value Added Models and other high-stakes teacher assessment practices shaping teachers' professional lives according to the supposed types of students the tests "prove" theirs to be (e.g., Amrein-Beardsley, 2014; Darling-Hammond, Amrein-Beardsley, Haertl, & Rothstein, 2012; Gabriel & Lester, 2013; Holloway-Libell, 2014; Pullin, 2015).

Where is the locus of accountability in this new normal? If it lies with teachers, then why is their agency increasingly stripped away? If it lies with students, then why do a narrow range of abilities that pre-exist instruction pre-ordain their supposed abilities? If it lies with the system, then why are these persistent failures blamed on teachers, students, families, or the economy? The answer to all of these questions lies in the de-contextualized and opportunistic ways that data and evidence are used and how those practices contradict the ideologies and discourses that claim agency, meritocracy, and neo-liberalism as both the question and the answer.

As mentioned at the outset, this article started with an unsettled curiosity about the discursive process by which a supposed type of student seemed to be severely constrained by the Singapore education system, based on test scores and the types of learning or behavioral issues this type of student was purported to have early in their school career. In looking at the texture, processes, and details of how NT students are constructed across multiple scales of discourse, I conclude that what matters most is the interweaving of beliefs and the contexts that create deficit positions for students to occupy. Taking a step back, we are all constrained by the various interconnected systems that make up our lives—who we know, what we do, where we live, what we believe, how others perceive us, and so on. But a more insidious reality is that education systems across the world are increasingly drawing from the same sets of values and ideologies that have been constraining possibilities for what success looks like, or how "ability" is defined and measured. The types of measurement that undergird meritocracy and test-based tracking is one impoverished way out of many to make sense of complex and ecological phenomenon as simple types named according to the structurally delimited opportunities that await them.

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